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## Leveraging Online Social Capital: How the German Red Cross Uses Social Networking Sites

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# Leveraging Online Social Capital: How the German Red Cross Uses Social Networking Sites

*Full Paper*

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## **Abstract**

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that focus on humanitarianism, such as the Red Cross, provide services that make the world a better place. To do so, they are highly dependent on a network that generates goodwill, volunteers, and donations. Social Networking Sites (SNS) are a vital channel for NGOs to pursue their organisational objectives. However, how NGOs utilise SNS to tap into resources for social action is insufficiently understood. In this paper, we investigate how the German Red Cross builds and fosters online social capital via SNS. We conducted semi-structured interviews with five SNS experts from regional units of the German Red Cross and analysed their corresponding Twitter and Facebook profiles. Our findings help identify crucial areas of social capital management via SNS for practitioners in the non-profit sector. Moreover, our research contributes to the conceptualisation of organisational online social capital by classifying SNS constituents with respect to structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions.

**Keywords** Social networking sites, social media, online social capital, humanitarian aid, non-governmental organisations, German Red Cross.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that focus on humanitarianism such as the Red Cross, Oxfam, and Amnesty International are an essential part of society and have as their primary aim the pursuit of social, cultural, and scientific goals. To achieve their objectives, such organisations engage in a variety of activities such as protecting and assisting disaster victims, providing technical and medical assistance in general, and educating the public regarding various health issues. In Germany, volunteering with NGOs has a long tradition; it is particularly important to these organisations because volunteers constitute the ‘backbone of the system’ that is reinforced by paid employees (Federal Ministry of the Interior 2016, p. 17). Hence, volunteering plays an important role in maintaining these organisations. However, long-term demographic trends may negatively affect the number of volunteers that work for NGOs (Federal Ministry of the Interior 2016). In addition, while members of such organisations are working to help their fellow citizens, they paradoxically may experience violence as they do so, from verbal insults to spitting, shoving, and kicking; this makes their altruistic efforts stressful and less desirable (Lechner 2018). To counter this, it is even more crucial that NGOs emphasize the contributions they make to society and actively promote volunteer work.

To create awareness of their goals and make their achievements known, NGOs aim to educate and inform the public about what is needed to support their activities. Social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook or Twitter serve as platforms that enable an ongoing interaction between NGOs and the public. Generally, SNS serve as a channel for a variety of public relations and marketing purposes, similar to the commercial sector (e.g., Chung et al. 2017; Gallagher and Ransbotham 2010). Activities such as customer service, customer relationship management, product promotion, advertising, and stakeholder research are also relevant for non-profit organisations. Among existing and potential endorsers, NGOs utilise SNS to promote loyalty and engagement, word-of-mouth communication about their NGO and related activities, awareness, and to generate ‘likes’ for the organisation (Ashley and Tuten 2015). Such activities translate to investments in a metaphorical stock of social resources that is often referred to as online social capital (Ellison et al. 2007). It provides a lens that depicts online linkages as an enabler of the formation of social ties (C.P. Lin 2011). Social capital increases the capabilities of organisations to access resources from more distant social structures (Burt 1995). Turning to the theoretical concept of social capital, we argue, will promote a better understanding of the scope and impact of NGOs’ SNS activities, which are based primarily on cultivating reciprocal relationships. Understanding how SNS can be utilised to build and nurture online social capital will help improve the conceptualisation of organisational online social capital, develop best practices for NGOs and improve their (altruistic) performance indicators. Thus, we aim to contribute to answer the following question:

**RQ:** *How do NGOs utilise SNS to build and foster online social capital?*

The primary aim of this work is to investigate how the utilisation of SNS creates value for an NGO’s operational activities. We approach this matter from a social capital perspective, as the non-profit sector represents a paradigm of organisational tasks in an environment of reciprocity, trust, and volunteer work. In the absence of direct monetary performance indicators, social capital provides a pertinent theoretical entry point to explore this matter. Moreover, our study attempts to develop implications for NGO practitioners. To do so, we conducted five semi-structured expert interviews with social media operators of regional units of the German Red Cross. This research paper is intended to be the cornerstone for a series of studies involving the investigation of online social capital in NGOs. The relevance of our paper is emphasised by the theme of this conference and a recent call within the IS community (ISJ 2019) that stresses the importance of studies examining how the deployment of Information Technology (IT) may contribute to a better world.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section provides an overview of the current literature about NGOs and their SNS utilisation. We then explain social capital and its application in SNS research. Our qualitative research design is outlined in the subsequent section. We then present our findings that resulted from the interview and SNS data. We conclude with contributions, limitations, and an outlook for further research.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 NGOs and Social Networking Sites

NGOs are highly diverse organisations—in terms of structure and operations—that engage in a variety of activities. Generally, NGOs pursue progress in humanitarian, educational, health care, environmental, political, and other sectors according to their particular interests. Despite their different orientations, NGOs share several things in common. Notably, they are funded primarily by donations,

which entails non-profit distributing; that is, if a financial surplus is generated, it is not distributed to owners. NGOs remain private and institutionally detached from governments; they are self-governing and manage their own activities. Finally, they are based on voluntary engagement: while they may also employ some paid staff, their members are primarily volunteers (Lewis 2001).

NGOs engage in SNS, such as Facebook or Twitter, to promote their activities and organisation. SNS platforms allow users to create unique user profiles, access and create digital content, connect with other platform users, and view and traverse these connections (Kane et al. 2014). NGOs increasingly incorporate SNS in their operations, as shown in studies that have analysed NGOs' Twitter and Facebook content. Waters (2009) found that non-profit organisations use SNS to improve their fundraising efforts, for instance, by creating websites that allow people to invite friends to donate money in lieu of purchasing a birthday present. Similarly, Saxton and Wang (2014) investigated the utilisation of Facebook, Twitter, and Crowdrise for NGOs' fundraising efforts and found fundraising success to be related in particular to the quality of the organisation's website as a source for potential donors to obtain further information. In this regard, SNS help raise awareness about an organisation and its website and act as an 'echo chamber'. They concluded that SNS do not fully replace traditional fundraising methods, but complement them by reaching a large audience and thus helping NGOs pursue their objectives.

Beyond SNS fundraising activities of NGOs, Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) examined the Twitter accounts of 73 U.S. NGOs and concluded that they utilise Twitter for three different main purposes: information, community, and action. In particular, NGOs use Twitter to disseminate general information about the organisation's activities, community-related tweets such as gratitude, information about current events, as well as action-related tweets such as donation appeals, event and product promotion, lobbying, or calls for volunteers. In a similar vein, Waters et al. (2009) investigated the Facebook profile of NGOs from various sectors and concluded that NGOs rarely use Facebook to disseminate organizational news, and only a few provided multi-media content on their profiles to engage with the audience. Greenberg and MacAulay (2009) state that Canadian environmental NGOs are very diverse in utilizing SNS platforms: a very few use SNS to build networks of collaborators and are highly interactive with their users, whereas others utilise SNS only to disseminate information. Likewise, Lovejoy et al. (2012) found that many non-profit organisations use Twitter mostly for disseminating information. However, there is not yet a detailed investigation that goes beyond SNS content analysis to explore NGOs' utilisation of SNS as a socio-economic asset.

## 2.2 Organisational Online Social Capital

The central idea of social capital theory is that an individual's social network provides a valuable resource for future social action (Bourdieu 1986). Although scholars generally agree on this basic concept, the term lacks consensus as it is employed in a variety of disciplines and with differing definitions. Building upon the work of Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998), we propose a wide definition of social capital that includes not only relationships between actors but also the capabilities embedded in those connections. Therefore, we understand social capital as the sum of available and potentially accessible resources derived from the network of an individual, a group, or an organisation (Bowles and Gintis 2002). Consequently, social capital comprises both the structure of a network as well as the advantages that can be activated only by that network (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998).

While scholars agree there is a strong relationship between SNS utilisation and social capital (Baym 2015; Ellison et al. 2007), the literature remains divided regarding the extent to which the laws of social capital apply to organisational actors. Organisations, and NGOs in particular, undoubtedly seek to maintain connections to other individuals, groups, and organisations. Baker (1990) argues that organisations, by 'deliberately manipulating market interfaces' (p. 619), are able to make use of the social capital that emerges from relations between the organisation and its stakeholders. In our study, we aim to strengthen the notion of organisational online capital by investigating the SNS utilisation of NGOs. As our focus is on online social capital, the NGO network we examine relates to the social structure mirrored by the SNS relationships the organisation deploys across different platforms. The advantages resulting from their organisational online social capital relate to the implications drawn from the NGOs' platform activities.

To categorise potential results, we turn to a three-dimensional concept of social capital: structural, relational, and cognitive (Lin 1999; Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998). These three dimensions partly overlap, and thus may be difficult to differentiate in practice, but they nevertheless serve as a guiding construct for our analysis. This approach enables us to arrange and interpret the structures, resources, and advantages of NGO utilisation of SNS in a more organised fashion. While social ties may be maintained both on- and offline, we focus on social capital that results from SNS deployment by NGOs.

Originating from a network perspective on social capital, the *structural* dimension of an actor's social capital is defined by network metrics that specify its relationships. This encompasses the quantity, frequency, and arrangement of connections (Lin 1999). The structural dimension of social capital characterises the channels for information flow through which an actor may access other actors and their resources. Hence, divergent network structures affect the establishment and care of social capital differently. SNS networks emulate such structures through, for example, representing information exchange pathways, friends and follower networks, or community groups (C. P. Lin 2011). So-called structural holes indicate gaps between individuals within the same social structure that should have access to the same resources (Burt 1995). We adapt this understanding to NGOs and the parameters of their SNS representation.

The *relational* dimension relates to trust, norms, obligations, and identification of an actor (Chiu et al. 2006). It stresses the underlying motive of sharing that is essential to nurturing social capital. Insofar as it overlaps with structural characteristics, a reciprocal relationship may also be represented by equally directed connections or activities. However, the relational dimension provides a lens to examine the behavioural factors of NGOs and how NGOs attempt to increase the quality of their networks.

Finally, the *cognitive* dimension relates to shared codes, languages, and shared narratives. According to Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998), common paradigms and goals as well as collective visions and a unified culture are important for the emergence of social capital. In our study, the cognitive dimension allows for a superordinate characterisation of NGOs in terms of how they apply inter-subjective understanding to their SNS utilisation. Examining which expressions and meanings within SNS reinforce engagement helps shed light on the amplifying forces of social capital for NGOs on SNS.

From an organisational perspective, assessing the potential value of social capital from SNS utilisation has become a desired outcome of research and practice in unison with the increasing clout of SNS. For instance, online linkages enable the formation of weak ties, which in turn serve as the foundation of bridging social capital (Burt 1995; Putnam 1995), the type that describes connections that link people across common societal divides (such as class, or race, or religion). Additionally, SNS provide users that share some kind of relational goals with an alternative way to connect. Online interactions themselves, Julien (2015) argues, build new social capital. This assumption is based on Bourdieu's classic theory that postulates social capital to be the accumulation of resources that, in this case, circulate through the ties and memberships of a particular SNS. This so-called online social capital nurtured from SNS does not represent the sum of one's social capital (Ellison et al. 2007). Nevertheless, online social capital constitutes a valuable asset for organisations. In this context, online social capital is often reduced to being a driver of economic growth. Through SNS, commercial organisations intensify their efforts to build an online network of social relations with, for example, customers, social influencers, and other stakeholders (Antoci et al. 2012). The same principles apply to the non-profit sector, as in our case exemplified by NGOs. Such organisations build online social capital not to market products and services, but rather to increase their ability to create social welfare and foster altruistic activities (Bahmani et al. 2012).

### 3 RESEARCH DESIGN

To answer our research question, we employ a case study approach (Piekkari et al. 2009) as a research strategy in which we analyse the phenomenon (i.e., building and maintaining online social capital through the utilisation of SNS) in its naturalistic context (i.e., SNS communication practices of NGOs). We investigate the leveraging effects of online social capital from two perspectives. On one hand, we focus on how SNS operators within the NGO perceive their use of SNS to foster social capital for the organisation. For this, we conducted semi-structured interviews (Myers and Newman 2007) with experts from the case organisations and analysed the interview transcripts using a qualitative content analysis approach proposed by Mayring (2014). On the other hand, we analysed the SNS content of the NGOs whose experts we interviewed to understand how the intentions of the SNS operators translate to their activities and what areas would benefit from increased leverage (Flick 2018). This included a manual content analysis of the SNS profiles.

#### 3.1 Description of the Case Organisation and Data Collection

Our interviewees were recruited from regional units of the German Red Cross (GRC), a major German NGO (Federal Ministry of the Interior 2016). The GRC has a three-level structure of responsibility at state, county, and regional levels. Tasks of the units comprise, amongst others, medical and rescue services during major events, emergencies, or crises, patient care, public education (such as first aid trainings), and blood donation sessions. The majority of the GRC's members are trained volunteers; only a minority are paid employees. Each unit retains a high degree of autonomy, maintaining their own

websites and SNS presence such as Facebook pages or Twitter accounts. Our interviewees have each been responsible for SNS communication for at least four years and thus have extensive knowledge and experience regarding SNS communication of their local units (see table 1). All the semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face by the same researcher in January and early February 2018 at the location of each GRC unit. The underlying interview guide was developed with the help of the literature on social capital outlined in the review section. The interview guide was discussed iteratively within the research team to ensure that the interviews covered all three dimensions of social capital. Each interview was recorded.

Each interview had four phases. In the first phase, the interviewer described the interview process to the interviewee. This included outlining the interviewee’s rights and written consent for the interview to be recorded. The researcher then proceeded with the ‘ice-breaker’ part of the interview, which included general questions regarding the GRC and the interviewee’s job description, aimed at ensuring that the interviewee was comfortable with the interview approach as well as to help the interviewer understand the level of the interviewee’s involvement with SNS.

The second phase of the interview included questions about the general use of SNS, such as about the kind of SNS the GRC uses, why they use these SNS for communication, and the stakeholders the GRC tries to address. The purpose of these questions was to uncover the relevant SNS and stakeholders as well as the general structure of the SNS and thus tease out the structural component to foster online social capital via SNS. The third phase aimed to uncover the relational dimension of social capital through questions about how the organisation tries to establish relationships and what the GRC tries to achieve. Hence, we asked how they would describe their contacts with their stakeholders, about the role of trust-based relationship within SNS, whether there is a lack of resources within the organisation and how SNS could help remedy that lack of resources, and about the kinds of relationships with stakeholders and the potential for information exchange. The fourth phase relates to the cognitive component of social capital, that is, shared codes, languages, and narratives. Therefore, we asked questions about the creation of SNS content, the media and narratives that are shared on SNS, choices regarding use of the formal or informal German personal pronoun, and about how the organisation responds to problems, interests, or comments of stakeholders. Table 1 is an overview of the five interviewees.

| Organisation | Gender | Age | Time in SNS role | Staff | Volunteer | Duration  |
|--------------|--------|-----|------------------|-------|-----------|-----------|
| GRC unit 1   | male   | 59  | 8 years          | X     | X         | 32:45 min |
| GRC unit 2   | male   | 30  | 4 years          | -     | X         | 33:25 min |
| GRC unit 3   | male   | 58  | 8 years          | X     | -         | 25:46 min |
| GRC unit 4   | male   | 55  | 4 years          | X     | -         | 34:50 min |
| GRC unit 5   | male   | 21  | 4 years          | -     | X         | 22:57 min |

Table 1. Overview of Interviewees

We also collected social media data from the GRC units’ SNS profiles during the period 20 October 2017 to 20 January 2018. We opted for a three-month observation timeframe to ensure that the quantity of content from each unit was sufficient for our analysis, given that there were considerable differences with respect to the number of each unit’s published messages.

### 3.2 Coding Approach and Data Analysis

We analysed the transcribed interviews using a qualitative content analysis approach based on Mayring (2014) to identify how the GRC uses SNS to foster online social capital. Our analysis approach involved three major steps. First, we applied a reduction step to summarise the interview data inductively into distinct categories, which were, in the second step, reduced to broader themes. In the third analysis step, we structured the themes into the structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions of online social capital. One researcher coded the complete dataset. To ensure the internal validity of the data constructs, we discussed the categories and themes in several meetings.

For the data from the SNS profiles of each unit, we manually analysed the content of all corresponding Twitter and Facebook profiles according to the three social capital dimensions. For the structural dimension, we focused on the reach of the profile in terms of the number of likes or followers and the quantity of content. For the relational dimension, we coded each message according to its purpose and thus set out the *what* of the content. For the cognitive dimension, we focused on the *how* of the messages, which included their use of SNS design elements such as links, photos, retweets, or likes.

## 4 RESULTS

This section summarises our findings based on the structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions of social capital. Figure 1 is an overview of our findings related to GRC's online social capital; it reflects the structure of our findings according to the threefold concept of social capital as well as the differentiation in internal and external stakeholders identified in our interviews (see below).

|          | Structural dimension   | Relational dimension  | Cognitive dimension   |
|----------|--|---|---|
| Internal | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Closed groups</li> <li>- Member/staff network</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Staff allocation</li> <li>- Event promotion</li> <li>- Appreciation</li> <li>- Bulletin board/company newsletter</li> <li>- Information/knowledge sharing</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Consistency</li> <li>- Understandable language</li> <li>- Norms and principles</li> <li>- Relevance</li> <li>- Neutrality</li> </ul>               |
| External | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Public profile</li> <li>- Follower/fan network, including donors, prospective members, politicians, general public</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Recruitment &amp; donations</li> <li>- Reputation management</li> <li>- Appreciation</li> <li>- Education</li> <li>- Advertising of workshops</li> </ul>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Deletion of hate speech</li> <li>- Data protection &amp; anonymity</li> <li>- Legal conformity</li> <li>- Honest &amp; direct reporting</li> </ul> |

Figure 1. GRC's Online Social Capital Matrix

### 4.1 Structural Dimension of Social Capital

The structural dimension relates to the SNS *channels, ties, and network configuration* of the respective GRC unit. This encompasses the quantity, frequency, and arrangement of connections. Overall, our interviewees perceive Facebook and then Twitter as the most important SNS due to its popularity and scale of reach, but also mention other social media such as YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp as relevant. SNS platforms enable the GRC to address different stakeholders. In particular, the interviews revealed that the GRC units try mainly to reach two stakeholder groups via SNS: internal members (both staff and volunteers) and the general public external to the organisation. Some of the units segment the latter into donors, potential new volunteers, politicians, and people showing general interest. For internal communication, the GRC units use closed SNS groups (such as Facebook groups and also instant message apps such as WhatsApp) but also their profile pages. For external communication, the GRC units perceive their SNS profiles as an excellent tool for public relations.

### 4.2 Relational Dimension of Social Capital

The relational dimension refers to *what* the GRC units try to achieve with their SNS activity. Within their closed SNS groups, the GRC units advertise events, post general information, and allocate personnel to events or other operational activities. Prior to SNS, this allocation of personnel was resource- and time intensive: members had to be contacted individually by phone. Now, a request is shared with all relevant members through, for example, a closed SNS group; members can then register for a specific event. This enables the GRC to streamline its processes and reallocate resources to other tasks. In addition, the SNS content is perceived as a 'company newsletters' or 'bulletin board' that allows swift and direct communication to the organisation's members, who use SNS to receive instant updates and news. As one interviewee said, 'You could not publish news fast enough in other channels. But with Facebook it is pretty easy' (I1). This is especially useful for providing updates to volunteers who are not around every day. The GRC also uses SNS to store material for training exercises material ('YouTube, where movies are stored, for example, about exercises ...' (I1)) or to express thanks and appreciation to members for their engagement and show them that their work is recognized by others (I2).

With respect to communication to people external to the GRC unit, all units highlighted that they are in constant need of new volunteers, who they try to recruit via SNS. In doing so, some of the units can actually address potential volunteers via Facebook. One interviewee stated that they receive messages via Facebook such as 'I read on Facebook that you engage in this action, which I would also like to engage in' (I1). In fact, three of the five units have already succeeded in gaining additional volunteer engagement through SNS communication. The interviews revealed that Facebook communication, in particular, results in the successful recruitment of volunteers ('Via Facebook, for example, we have succeeded in building up reserves for [Germany's post-high school] 'Voluntary Social Year' and the federal voluntary service'). Twitter, in contrast, is not perceived as a successful recruitment channel.

In line with their recruitment efforts, most of the organisations we interviewed recognise the potential benefits of trust-based relationships ('Trust leads to commitment, and thus may let decide users to join the [unit]' (I2)). In addition to volunteers, the GRC depends on donations (e.g., money, blood) for its

activities. SNS channels are seen as valuable for addressing potential donors. This is currently done through active donation requests in SNS, as well through showcasing how donations are spent and linking to the organisation's website and thus further information. All interviewees expressed doubts regarding whether the current way of soliciting donations via SNS is effective.

Furthermore, the GRC units perceive their SNS profiles as excellent tools for public education, advertising workshops, and reputation enhancement ('If you need us, we're the ones helping' (I3)). Interviewees highlighted that SNS are helpful for showcasing to the public the services the GRC provides, raising interest about the entire range of work in which the units engage, and generally promoting their activities. This includes, for instance, publishing information about the GRC's work during disasters, emergencies, evacuations, and large-scale events, about workshops, and so on. GRC units also use their channels to educate the public about safety and rescue practices, such as providing information on what to do when encountering a car crash. Although SNS are generally recognised as a crowdsourcing tool, the interviews reveal that suggestions for improvements are not very common. When they do come, it is mostly from members of the GRC. These suggestions are mostly about internal organisational issues, such as improving employee workshops ('Those are actually more about internal issues. Nothing with big consequences, but things about which you say: 'Okay, she's actually right'. (I1)).

### 4.3 Cognitive Dimension of Social Capital

The cognitive dimension of online social capital refers to *how* SNS utilisation by the GRC takes place and is not further differentiated within the stakeholder groups. For all units, it is most important that the law and ethical practices apply to all their communication. Protecting the data and anonymity of victims is a high priority for all organisations when publishing information about an emergency event ('The most important thing is that anonymity is ensured. We don't publish names or pictures of faces' (I3)). They ensure that all means of identification are masked; e.g., the license plate of a car involved in an accident is concealed in a photo. They also avoid publishing any photos with potentially disturbing content, such as blood. In addition, three units stressed the importance of honest reporting combined with a consistent approach to responding to comments, although there is no general guideline to follow. Two interviewees mentioned that they complement their reporting by taking into account the interests and problems of their stakeholders and see the relevance of posting about events and information that is important for their followers and fans. 'You have a bit of a sense for people's interests' (I2).

One interviewee stated that SNS are used to clarify basic principles and norms of the GRC in terms of what the organisation stands for and what that means (I3). In this respect, the interviewee contrasted SNS with mass media. Articles in newspapers are framed by the journalist, whereas in SNS the information is authored by the organisation. In addition, the interviewees indicated that comments that are contrary to the values and norms of the GRC, such as insulting or racist comments, or comments that question the neutrality of the GRC, are deleted. For instance, in international conflicts, the GRC clarifies that it is not part of the conflict and that it helps all victims, regardless of their belonging to either side. The units check their channels at least once a day to ensure that the SNS sites comport with the organisational image.

Finally, the GRC is aware of the immediate information needs of its stakeholders, which is why one interviewee stated that information on its activities is published in a timely manner ('[T]hat means the event is still going on, but we already post the first picture on Facebook ...' (I4)). How they react to SNS comments and questions is quite different among the interviewees. Some reported that they read only comments from GRC's members, but do not see the point of reacting, whereas others state that when questions come up, they respond. Most of the units do not use features provided by SNS (such as @ or #) to facilitate dialogue, and see potential for improvement. However, all the GRC units try to use language that is easily understandable and without technical terms unless necessary, in which case they are explained. They also try to avoid using abbreviations and acronyms without first spelling them out.

### 4.4 Results from the Facebook and Twitter Content Analysis

Regarding the structural dimension of social capital, we noticed that all units use the digital infrastructure of Facebook and have a larger community on Facebook than on Twitter (see Table 2). On Facebook, all units achieve a larger number of likes for their organisations than they have followers on Twitter, and they publish significantly less content on Twitter than on Facebook. This comports with the interviewees, who indicated that GRC units consider Facebook to be the most important SNS platform they use. Generally, the units deploy SNS quite differently: some units publish content regularly and have a comparatively large community of follower or fans (e.g., units 1 and 4), whereas others rarely publish content (e.g., unit 2) or maintain a comparatively small online community (e.g., unit 5).



As for the relational dimension, we investigated the activities about which units publish as part of their SNS content to increase the quality of their networks. Generally, most content on Facebook, as well as on Twitter, are reports of a unit's activities, but they also publish severe weather warnings, public education, and condolences for deceased members. We also found that almost 50% of all newsfeed content is shared from other Facebook profiles run by the organisation. Also, the units use Facebook more often than Twitter to advertise events. Three of the units posted information about blood donation sessions and one posted about stem cell donations, but none posted about how to make monetary donations. Also, the GRC units don't promote ways to follow them in other channels. Only three units used Facebook to post job openings, and one tweeted information about job openings on Twitter. All units used Facebook to express thanks and recognition, and three GRC units employed Facebook's 'create an event' function twice during our three months of observation.

| Category   | Dimension                         | Unit 1   | Unit 2 | Unit 3  | Unit 4 | Unit 5  |
|------------|-----------------------------------|----------|--------|---------|--------|---------|
| Structural | Number of messages / posts        | 105 / 32 | 7 / 0  | 25 / 19 | 74 / 1 | 18 / 10 |
|            | Likes on Facebook                 | 1912     | 765    | 1748    | 1279   | 370     |
|            | Followers on Twitter              | 403      | 25     | 172     | 47     | 5       |
| Relational | Information about unit activities | 96 / 29  | 5 / 0  | 16 / 14 | 54 / 1 | 12 / 8  |
|            | Advertising events                | 5 / 1    | 0 / 0  | 3 / 1   | 14 / 0 | 2 / 1   |
|            | Appeals for donations             | 0 / 0    | 0 / 0  | 1 / 1   | 2 / 0  | 2 / 0   |
|            | Job openings                      | 0 / 0    | 1 / 0  | 1 / 1   | 1 / 0  | 0 / 0   |
|            | Recognition and thanks            | 4 / 0    | 1 / 0  | 2 / 3   | 3 / 0  | 3 / 0   |
|            | Creation of Facebook events       | 2        | 0      | 2       | 0      | 2       |
| Cognitive  | Content with use of: @            | 0 / 1    | 0 / 0  | 2 / 0   | 0 / 0  | 0 / 0   |
|            | Links                             | 13 / 5   | 0 / 0  | 2 / 19  | 13 / 0 | 3 / 10  |
|            | Photos                            | 86 / 22  | 6 / 0  | 18 / 0  | 64 / 1 | 14 / 0  |
|            | Videos                            | 3 / 1    | 1 / 0  | 3 / 0   | 1 / 0  | 0 / 0   |
|            | Hashtags                          | 4 / 6    | 0 / 0  | 1 / 1   | 13 / 0 | 1 / 1   |
|            | Commented content                 | 21 / 3   | 3 / 0  | 8 / 0   | 13 / 0 | 1 / 0   |

Table 2. Facebook and Twitter (indicated in *italics*) content during the three-month analysis.

With respect to the cognitive dimension, we found using photos to be the most popular way to promote postings, followed by the integration of (hyper)links that forward users to newspaper articles. Moreover, in Facebook the content is often shared by fans in their own user profiles, which results in the content having wider reach. In addition, the content almost always receives at least one 'like'. On rare occasions, the units supplement an article on Facebook with a video, and occasionally they use hashtags. The units almost never link other users in content or comments, but we did observe fans sometimes linking other users within comments. We found further that the units use comments on just under 25% of posted content, on average, and that the GRC units do not foster longer conversations. However, this may also be attributed to the fact that the comments rarely require a reaction from the organisation in terms of content. With respect to Twitter, most tweets attach a link, which often forwards the user to articles published on Facebook. The tweets of all units other than unit 1 are in text form and supplemented with a link. Surprisingly, the hashtag (typical on Twitter) is also only rarely used, although this can be attributed to the small number of tweets. In general, unit 1 serves as a prime example, as it makes use—on both Facebook and Twitter—of a great variety of photos, videos, links, and hashtags to increase the attractiveness of its contributions. These greater efforts (in comparison to the other units) yield small benefits in the form of the rare comment by followers on the content and occasionally retweets. In terms of dialogue engagement, tweets are occasionally liked by followers. The fact that most of the GRC units' content is not retweeted by their followers suggests that the scope of the messages is limited.

## 5 THEORETICAL REFLECTION

### 5.1 Social Capital and NGOs

The present study stresses that the utilisation of predefined platform structures defines (1) the digital space, *where* and *with whom* online social capital circulates and may be stored. In the context of the GRC, the two predominantly used SNS are Facebook and Twitter. Closed groups on Facebook enable the dissemination of organisational information among members, regardless whether they are volunteers or on the payroll. Similar to prior research (Lovejoy and Saxton 2012), we found that Twitter and Facebook content comprises postings aimed at informing interested stakeholders outside the organisation (the public, politicians, prospective members, donors, fans and followers). However, the results of this study emphasise that platform affordances do not automatically entail organisational utilisation in predefined structures. For instance, the GRC uses its Facebook profile as an internal 'bulletin board' and 'newsletter' dedicated to its members rather than as a stakeholder community

incubator. Due to the multi-level structure of the stakeholders addressed, Facebook functions not only as a tool for public relations for some of the GRC units, but also as an enterprise social platform. Twitter, in contrast, is used primarily for broadcasting information to interested stakeholders, but not for specific unit internal communication.

Defining the (2) overarching purpose of an organisation's online presence sets out *what* is aimed to be achieved by building and maintaining specific relationships online. We found that the GRC aims for two different kinds of online relationships. First, units use their profiles in a manner similar to an organisational intranet, to keep volunteers as well as staff informed about activities. This helps overcome structural holes via SNS within the organisation (Burt 1995) that could not be filled by interpersonal offline communication. Second, the GRC aims to inform the public about its activities to form its image and promote events. This contrasts with the findings of Waters et al. (2009), who at the time did not find that NGOs use their Facebook profiles to disseminate news about the organisations' activities. We found further that intentions regarding SNS usage are largely similar between the GRC units we investigated; however, the profile analyses revealed that content provided and active usage of SNS varies heavily. This is also in accordance with prior research on emergency management organisations, which found that SNS usage often depends on individual innovators and their SNS efforts (Latonero and Shklovski 2011). In our case, the units in which volunteers are responsible for the SNS published the least content during the three-month observation period.

Finally, the (3) shared cognitive elements of the first dimension open up entry points regarding *how* organisational online social capital might be attracted and stimulated. In particular, the GRC units consider it important that the content they publish correspond to the overall organisational values and, in doing so, that they apply shared codes and languages. Providing narratives within their SNS content from the organisation's perspective enables the units to foster common understanding, culture, and collective visions within the community, which is reflected in our interviews and SNS content analysis. Regarding community engagement, however, we found that while the GRC units are all aware of the positive effects of certain SNS affordances such as hashtags, links, or likes, they use those elements quite differently in terms of frequency, and they acknowledge that there is potential for improvement.

## 5.2 Towards a Notion of Organisational Online Social Capital

In our study, we draw on social capital theory as a guiding principle for investigating the economisation of online relations with regards to NGOs. However, as online relations are not completely congruent with offline relations (Antoci et al. 2012; Ellison et al. 2007), applying social capital theory in this context requires an adjustable interpretation of its elements. Social capital and its dimensions (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998), we argue, require further refinement with respect to the online space. Although Lin C.-P. (2011) found that social interaction, shared values, and trust are important factors in users' intention to continue to be fans of Facebook pages, but there is no consensus in the literature about how organisations facilitate and use their online social capital. From Bourdieu's perspective, NGOs should be able to garner interest from their investments in online relations in the form of economic capital (Bourdieu 1986), specifically increased donations. While we found no evidence that the GRC is currently able to increase economic capital through SNS utilisation, the indirect influx of money, blood donations, and human resources is a likely outcome of increased efforts to build online social capital. Generating economic capital is not an NGO's objective; rather, NGOs seek to increase awareness of their altruistic deeds, which depends even more on some form of social capital. The findings from our interviews with respect to the dimensions of online social capital increases our understanding of measures organisations may take to increase online social capital.

To get closer to a conceptualization of organisational online social capital, we propose a threefold approach. First, organisational social capital requires *strategic build-up*. Digital spaces such as SNS offer the infrastructure to invest in online social capital, receive and store the interest from such investments, and repeat the process. Developing recurring practices that involve all three dimensions of social capital, including the provision of value, will entail mutual trust and relationships of reciprocal character in multiple directions and among a variety of stakeholder groups. Second, organisational online social capital entails the potential of a *particular measurement* by making relations digitally visible. SNS, in particular, reveal the structural constituents of online relations. Relational and cognitive elements, we argue, are not yet manifest in organisational practice. They are, rather, defined implicitly and directed towards subordinate organisational goals. Third, organisational online social capital needs *targeted conversion*. Social capital is not an end in itself (Bourdieu 1986); therefore, it is imperative that organisational online social capital be converted into other forms of capital (and vice versa), or into social action that serves the purpose of the organisation. NGOs are an exemplar for the latter, as they aspire to convert social capital into support for humanitarian actions.

## 6 CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Investigating how the GRC units use SNS to create value and build meaningful online relationships resulted in an exemplary profile of organisational SNS deployment in the non-profit sector. We approached this matter from a social capital lens, as the non-profit sector represents a paradigm of organisational tasks in an environment of reciprocity, trust, and volunteer work. In the absence of direct monetary performance indicators, social capital provides a pertinent theoretical entry point. We conducted five semi-structured expert interviews with the social media operators of regional units of the GRC and contrasted the analysis of the interviews with a three-month analysis of corresponding SNS profiles to uncover how SNS utilisation within NGOs fosters online social capital.

Our findings suggest that Facebook and Twitter (along with instant message apps) tend to be the most important platforms for the GRC's social media presence. The results of our interviews suggest that these particular units deploy SNS with quite similarly in terms of platform-specific features and content. Structural elements in Facebook such as closed groups and public pages matter for both internal and external relationship building. Overarching missions such as recruiting new volunteers and reputation management, amongst others, define the relational positioning in SNS. Moreover, values such as integrity and inclusion drive the content creation of the organisational units we investigated. However, our analysis of the corresponding SNS pages reveals that the units' usage varies significantly in terms of content and frequency of interaction.

Moreover, our study informs practitioners of the importance of leveraging online social capital in all three dimensions to create value for an NGO. Addressing each element strategically may lead to an increased return on (social) investment by, for example, adding structural elements, consolidating relationships, and defining shared codes. Theoretically, our findings contribute to a possible conceptualisation of organisational online social capital. As a first approximation, we propose to take into account the strategic build-up, particular measurement, and targeted conversion of organisational online social capital. Yet it remains important to examine which elements of social capital withstand 'online-isation' to arrive at a clear-cut concept of organisational online social capital.

Our findings are based on interviews from only five regional units of one large NGO and on the corresponding analysis of those units' profiles. Further research based on a larger data set is needed to expand this discussion to similar NGOs. Furthermore, future research could extend the study to include the perspective of follower and fans and what they draw from the content provided by NGOs.

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